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Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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Abstract

For an hour now, Kthun had been studying the actions of his master. That is how he learned all he knew of rune craft: Falthir showed him much but told him little.

Keywords

Fiction; Mythril; Mythopoeic; The Forging; Bruce McMenomy

THE FORGING

by Bruce McMenomy



Falthir the smith always prepared his metals with care. That is how his fame had grown; so at least it was that he had told Kthun, his apprentice. A mighty wielder of the hammer was he, but his true craft and art in the management of the powerful Algheri runes was his glory. He was a master of them all; with fire-hardened scribe he graved them. Into the bare stock he cut the beaten-runes to be hammered into the hot steel: forge-runes they were, and hardening-runes, and fire-runes and temper-runes. With heavy hammer-fall then he would strike shape to a blade; then sword-runes, runes of fear and blood he would scribe there, runes to cut the battle-tides with mighty stroke. Upon the pommel, when all else was finished, he would finally fix his own rune, a rune of many charms, and the mark of the Falthiri blade.

Great were the swords that Falthir forged. It is said that in battle the full fury of the forge's fire they recalled, and sizzled and spat their way through lines of men. One would glow at the crest of a victorious charge, and several who had been there had said that they had heard a song, clear and ringing, high and terrible, when Theurg had lifted the Falthiri blade to meet the onslaught of the worm beneath the crag of Nekthun. In that hour was the forge of Falthir glorified, that its swords could slay the dragon upon whose scales had been splintered the greatest of the world's blades.

Indeed, all of Falthir's swords had been great. Yet tonight, he had said, tonight he would forge for himself his greatest sword.

For an hour now, Kthun had been studying the actions of his master. That is how he learned all he knew of runecraft: Falthir showed him much but told him little. Kthun had learned to watch Falthir very carefully. Yet now it puzzled him that the great smith should need to be looking in the old leather-bound volume; it was a catalogue of runes, and yet what charm in all the art of forging could be unknown to Falthir himself?

He watched him closely, and the apprentice began to discern something in the countenance of his master. He could not name it precisely, yet the face of Falthir seemed to have gathered up new lines, and been washed with a kind of paleness that ill befitted his usual gruff bearing.

The smith finally closed the book after copying, as Kthun saw even from a distance, a line of ten runes. Walking slowly to his high bench, Falthir began to cut the runes into a bar of cold grey steel. Cautiously, guiding one hand with the other, he scribed the first, and anointed it with a special light oil that he kept for the best swords. Kthun had heard that it was an oil of the dragon, with special charms, but he was not sure. Yet it was obviously valuable; Falthir kept it in a tight glass vial when he was not using it, and he used it only sparingly when he used it at all. Now he set to cutting the second charm, and now the third.

"Alvthri, eddhun," he said, and Kthun thought he sensed a distraction in his voice, and a vague shadow of a trembling. Slowly the apprentice arose, walked quietly nearer to where the smith stood cutting the fourth rune. Falthir, as usual, paid him no heed, but looked intently from the piece of parchment with the inscription to the metal and back again. "Eglerithuin," came his voice, as from far away, as he dipped his finger in the oil-pan.

The fifth rune he cut now, and then began the sixth. Kthun's eyes wandered over the pattern. But something was wrong with that sixth rune. It was an unbalanced rune, somehow. Something was indeed wrong with it and about it. He watched the steady hand of Falthir trace the strokes of it over the bar of grim steel. Yet it seemed to the boy that the elder hand shook--so slightly, yet enough to be perceptible. Of a sudden impulse Kthun asked Falthir, "What is wrong with that rune, Derfir?"

Falthir's crusty fingers whitened slightly as he gripped the scribe still more tightly, yet it was a while before he spoke. "Wrong, Glichun! It is a beaten-rune, forged into the metal."

"No--I know that." Too well he knew that. Why did Falthir speak of what they obviously both knew? Bewildered, he decided to rephrase his question. "No, Derfir; it is the very rune itself. What is wrong with it? It looks somehow--I just--" He dared not finish his statement. Falthir had made an end to the sixth rune, and now met his questioning with a countenance glazed with flame. Kthun bowed, and Falthir turned slowly back to his work. As he withdrew slowly to watch from farther away, Kthun saw his master shudder again, but this time it was a convulsion of the entire body, almost violent. Kthun watched on in silence.

At length the voice of Falthir broke the tense silence. "Kthun-glich?"

"Yes, Derfir?"

"Lay a fire in the forge. Make it well. I will begin to forge this tonight."

Kthun, somewhat disappointed that he had not been told any more of the rune, withdrew to the forge to comply. High he piled the little coals, and hot he built the fire. Almost before he was through, his master tossed down his scribe, caught up the bar, and walked to the fire. He examined it closely before swiftly plunging the metal among the coals. Yet in that short time before he did so Kthun, still endeavoring to learn all he could of runecraft, saw upon that stock which Falthir held not the ten runes that were on the parchment, but nine. Did Falthir know? Had he made a mistake? Kthun was about to point it out when he remembered that he had provoked Falthir once today; doing it again might awaken a fearful wrath: he kept his silence.

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The force of the beaten-rune takes effect from the hammer's first blow upon red steel; that is well known. Carefully Kthun watched now as Falthir drew the metal from the fire to see it at its proper hue. He had seen charmed forgings before. They were often fraught with strange occurrences, none of which ever seemed to surprise Falthir, but which were a source of constant amazement to his apprentice. Sometimes showers of sparks of many colors would fly forth and seem to dance all about. Sometimes the very steel would seem to be aflame, or it would writhe as if it were a living thing. Sometimes at the first blow an energy was released seemingly beyond any understanding. He had seen Falthir, no small man, thrown across the room by the blind fury of his own charms.

Yet nothing had prepared Kthun for what was to happen. Falthir placed the bare steel on the giant anvil and lifted his heavy hammer above his head. For an instant he paused, and though his back was turned to Kthun, the boy saw in his mind an image of the face of the great smith wincing for a moment, as if anticipating pain or some great occurrence.

Before the vision had faded in Kthun's mind, Falthir brought the hammer down with a ringing crash squarely among the runes of the bar. Then, straightening and standing tall and mighty, Falthir let go of the bar and left it lying on the anvil. For a second he stood, motionless.

Now, whence Kthun never could recall, there appeared three dark masses on the opposite side of the anvil, proceeding, it seemed, somehow from the bar itself, and drawing shadows from it rather than from the forge's fire. They gradually solidified into shaped forms. Dark and menacing, that they were men was impossible, yet they had heads and chests and arms. They were far greater than any man, however, towering above Falthir. Also, they had no legs: they seemed to rise out of a formless mist of darkness. Even the formed parts appeared somewhat insubstantial. Yet in their hands they held huge hammers which looked very real and very heavy.

Falthir began to speak to them, or rather at them, in a tongue Kthun had not heard ever before. The shapes, positioned where Kthun, having withdrawn to the shadows, could have seen their faces had they had any features so distinct as to make any real faces, moved closer to the anvil, their hammers raised high. Closer and closer they came, and Falthir pointed boldly at the stock and uttered a few more words; commands, it seemed to Kthun. Then in single accord, the three brought their hammers down in a great wide sweeping arc--unerringly into Falthir's skull. Wordlessly the smith crumpled, and his mangled head hit the stained boards of the floor and was still.

Huddled in the corner, Kthun watched in horror. Falthir, his master, Falthir the great smith, Falthir, so instantly stricken. He could not comprehend it. How had he fashioned his own doom? What had been his error? The thought of the nine runes, and the sixth, flashed across his mind, and he was sickened. Had his own disturbing interruption caused a fatal error to be wrought? Yet now he watched with growing wonder and terror as the three dark shapes ignored the fallen smith and turned instead to the forge.

With demonic fury they began to work the blade, two hammering together while the third kept the fire burning at its hottest. Slowly flames began to rise, and the one who acted as the fire-tender bent over them, and seemed to speak to them, causing them to rise even higher, until they licked at his arms. Kthun was certain that he must be incinerated, yet he seemed to pay no heed to himself. Only the forge's fire was his care, and it

became soon enough apparent that it did not hurt him at all. With his hand he turned the flames back into the coals, and they glowed yet more brightly.

Now the hammers rang again, furiously, insanely. They crashed on the anvil, and the air sang with their voices, high, shrill, and sharp. The tireless rhythm broke only that the metal should be plunged once more into the forge; and now it was out again and the hammers were at it.

Kthun saw now that Falthir had been right: this would probably be the greatest blade ever begun by the hand of man. It was boldly shaped, strong and heavy, and, unlike any sword Kthun had ever before seen made, out of a single piece of metal. Yet the question now pressed itself upon him: who would wield it, and to what end? And the pounding went on, and on.

Suddenly, without warning, it stopped. Kthun heard then a voice which seemed to come, he later thought, more from everywhere in general than anywhere in particular, though one of the forge-demons seemed to be speaking it, an incantation or cry, as he plunged the hammer with its wooden haft into the still rising fire and, drawing it out, brought it down, blazing, upon the pommel. The hammer cracked into smoldering bits and a scream tore into the air as the flames leaped to kindle an unconsuming fire on the pommel which quickly ran the length of the blade. Then, leaping upon the fallen body of Falthir, the creature lifted the sword high above his head. From the blade, flames leaped up to kindle the beams. There was the sound of three separate booming laughers, and a shrill cry, and the three rushed out the doorway under the stars. A shout of defiance rang out and the building shuddered.

Kthun crept from the shadows to the door and peered around the post to see where the three shapes had gone, and whether there was a chance of escaping the building, fast burning, without being detected. To his dismay and yet to his great wonder, he saw that the three were just a short way outside the door, and that they were completely still.

Somewhat preoccupied in trying to figure out how to get from the rapidly burning structure without being seen, Kthun nevertheless looked at them, and then a movement attracted his attention to a point beyond. About twenty feet from the doorway, by the ancient well, he saw a shadow. Then by the flames he discerned that it was a hooded figure; the face could not be seen. In its right hand the figure held aloft a staff, before it the three had retreated and bent down. Perhaps, thought Kthun, he was their master. Perhaps he was the true murderer of Falthir. A rage and violence welled up within Kthun, yet he still clung to the diminishing safety of the burning building.

Before he could decide on anything, however, a rafter came crashing down but a few feet behind him. He was tempted to flee blindly out the door and simply run. In desperation he looked up to find the quickest and most protected way into the dark woods that came within thirty feet of the shop, where he thought he might be afforded some safety. His fear of the fire tugged at him to dash out, and his fear of the creatures, whatever they were, demanded that he first search out a way. So he peered out into the firelit night once more.

They were not there. They had vanished, and, Kthun noticed as he plunged through the door as an arrow flies when it is just released, so also had the hooded shape vanished. Kthun stopped at the well, on almost the same spot where the hooded one had been standing, and he looked back towards the shop. A ways inside the door, by the anvil, he could yet see there on the floor the hand of Falthir, still in the ruddy glow. Then a choking and melting together of fear and pain came upon him and he plunged toward the black woods and ran far into the trackless night.

Parma Eldalamberon is the journal of the Mythopoeic Linguistic Fellowship, interested in all matters linguistic and philological. The first issue contains an extensive Glossary of Old Solar by Joe R. Christopher; a new phonemic mode for writing English in the Tengwar; two (count 'em!) articles by Robert Foster on the intricacies of Anglo-Saxon and LotR; a new (we hope) theory of archaic Sindarin plurals; and divers bits of etymological trivia concerning the tongues of Middle-earth and Deep Heaven. Parma Eldalamberon/The Book of the Elven Tongues is 12pp. offset for 50¢, and is available from Paula Marmor, 8339 Pierce Drive, Buena Park, California 90620. Come learn the lost name of Aragorn!

A Limerick

An Aussie-and-artist named Assle
Drew illos of Winnie so facile,

But "Pool" they all cried,
"Importation denied--

"You're bringing koalas to Newcastle!"

by J. R. Christopher
from a pun by Nan Braude

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